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THE GENERAL'S MESSAGE

by

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In the winter of 1846, an Indian youth, tall for his age, stood before General Kearny in California. He could not understand all the words the man said, and he turned now and then to his master, a naval officer, to read some message from the expression on his face.

"I must warn you, Lieutenant Beale, this is a dangerous task you have volunteered to do," the General was saying. "But we have no other hope, except by sending word to the Commodore for help."

He seemed to have grown many years older in these past few days and his voice sounded tired and sad. The small company was trapped hiding among the rocks on a hillside, and there was no water, and no food except a little mule meat. They would be forced to surrender unless reinforcements could reach them, very soon from San Diego.

"As you know, the men we sent before you were captured in front of our very eyes," General Kearny went on. "Do you think you can succeed where these men failed?"

This much the Indian had understood, and his mind was filled with doubt. He could see the Spanish sentries even now as he looked out in all directions, three cordons of mounted lancers surrounding the hill, posted to watch their every move. And his master, though he might be brave, was not a strong man.

"I would like to go too, sir," a mild voice spoke out.

The Indian turned to face a sandy-haired man dressed in the clothes of a trapper rather than a soldier, and wearing moccasins on his feet. He saw the blue eyes look into his own for an instant, and wrinkle in a smile, and the boy threw back his shoulders and smiled too, full of confidence, now. With Kit Carson along, the message was sure to get through.

"Very well," even the General looked relieved as he spoke, though he had never liked the idea of having civilians under him in a campaign. "Be ready to set out at dusk tonight."

When darkness came, three shadowy figures crept down the hill. The young Indian knew how to move so silently that he made no more sound than the stirring of a gentle breeze, and Kit Carson, beside him, was as quiet. But each step, no matter how cautious, that Lieutenant Beale took upon the dry earth, sounded in their ears like the beating of a drum.

"Let's take off our shoes," Kit Carson whispered. "They make too much noise."

He took off his own moccasins but he made a motion to the Indian that he did not have to remove his. The two older men tucked their shoes in their belts and started on, through the underbrush and over the rocks and boulders. They came close to the first line of sentries and one of the canteens rattled against a rock. Water was precious, but their lives were more precious still. They unbuckled the straps and left the three canteens behind.

They passed the first line of sentries, but the second line had more space to cover, and they were riding up and down, up and wo down. As the three came near, they crawled along the ground, worming their way, inch by inch/ The cactus thorns pricked them and the sharp stones cut them, but they could not turn back now. A horseman came their way and stopped in full sight. He sat on his horse like a shadow against the starry sky. It was the Spanish Commander himself.

"The Americans will try to send another party to San Diego tonight," he called out to his men. "This time, without doubt, Kit Carson will be one of them. Keep your eyes open. Guard every inch of the hillside, and don't let them get away."

"The sentry has seen us and he's giving the alarm," Lieutenant Beale said in despair. "There's nothing now we can do but get up and fight for our lives."

"Keep still," Kit Carspn whispered. "I've been in worse fixes than this many a time, and I've always got out of them."

To the Indian boy, crouched in the darkness waiting, it seemed that even the clouds stood still in the sky, and the whole earth was hushed. His master and Kit Carson lay close by, so quiet that he could not hear their breathing, but they were watching, too, he knew, ready to spring at the first movement of the two guards on horseback.

Suddenly one of the guards laughed and he rode away. His arms could be heard clanking with the movement of the horse. They had not been detected after all. The guards had merely been talking and joking with each other to while away the time. But if they had listened close, they might have heard three hearty sighs and whispered prayers of thanks.

"That was about as close a fix as I'd ever want to be in," Kit Carson admitted.

"How far is it to the grove of trees?" Lieutenant Beale asked.

"It's a good half mile, and we dare not get up on our feet till we get there," Carson whispered.

Again they started crawling, inch by inch, away from the sentry line, pausing only to look back and see if their shadows were noticed by the mounted guard.

At last they came to the shelter of the grove, with a clear, cool stream running through. The night wind was cold, but it felt good to their tired feet to stand in the water and let the waves wash over them. They stretched out their arms and legs, and they no longer had to talk in whispers.

"Where are my moccasins?" the lieutenant said, searching the the darkness over the ground.

"Mine are gone, too," Kit Carson said. "They must have dropped from our belts as we crawled past the sentry lines."

The Indian boy had not needed to take off his own moccasins, as he could creep over the earth without making a sound. He held them now toward the two men."

"Here are mine, if either of you wants to wear them," he said.

"A moccasin's something that's got to fit the foot it's made for or it's no good," Kit said, waving them away. "We'll go on the rest of the way in our bare feet."

"How much farther do we have to go?" the lieutenant asked.

"Thirty miles," was the reply.

They started out, guided only by the light of the stars. Now they could walk upright, for they no longer needed to crouch and hide. They took long strides, stepping around the cactus beds to get out of the way of the thorns. Gradually the eastern sky lightened, and then they saw the sun rise over the desert. They slowed their steps now, for they knew what the day would bring, for the desert sun could be more powerful than any weapon of the enemy.

On and on they walked. Though it was winter, the sun shone hotter as it climbed higher in the sky. By noon the sands were so baked that they were like hot ashes under their feet. There was no shade anywhere. As far as their eyes could see, there was only desert with sage brush and cactus growing so close together that their thorns were scattered all over the ground. Even the moccasins the boy wore were of little protection now. It had been a long time since they had eaten, and there was not even water, for they had thrown away the canteens because of the sound they had made against the rocks as they crossed the sentry lines.

The Indian's steps lagged. Would the sun never set, he wondered. If he had not known this country so well, he would have believed they were retracing their steps, going around and around, for never had the desert seemed so endless. The lieutenant was in a fever, and they stopped for a while, but that was worse under the glaring sun, than pushing on. Kit Carson held him up by one arm and the Indian boy took the other, as they walked ahead with faltering steps.

"Do you think you can make it, boy?" Kit Carson asked.

The Indian looked up at the man's blue eyes and he saw them again crinkle in a smile.

"Yes sir," he replied.

Night came at last, and a cold wind blew over them. It brought relief to their weary feet and their parched lips. One by one the stars came out, shining so clear in the desert sky that it seemed they had only to reach out and pick them with their hands. Then they saw, far away in the distance, lights that might have been still more stars coming from the ground.

"San Diego!" They shouted in one breath.

But now there were new dangers. The enemy might be lurking about, trying to learn of the movements of the Americans at San Diego. After coming this far, they dared not run the risk of capture, with the message undelivered.

"We can't take any chances now at the last minute," Kit Carson was saying. "Lieutenant Beale, you go on straight there, as we are headed. It won't be long till you arrive, and give them your message."

He then turned to the Indian youth.

"You go around to the right, over there, just in case your master doesn't succeed. You know the message. Take it to the Commodore."

"And you?" the boy asked.

"I'll go around to the left," Kit replied.

The boy hesitated. The way to the left was a long way around, and it was there that the enemy was most likely to be hiding. That was the way he should go, for he knew the trail well. He started to speak, but Kit Carson touched his shoulder and said, gently,

"Hurry, fellow, we've no time to lose."

They were like shadows in the darkness, one man in a fever, staggering along the straight trail and the other, a small shadow walking with sure steps, far to the left. The Indian walked on alone, guided by the lights far away. A wolf howled, and another from the hilltop took up the cry and an owl swooped down close to his head.

He saw something moving ahead of him, and he stopped where he was, keeping his eyes upon it until it was far out of sight. It might have been a coyote or it might have been a man.

"Who goes there?" a voice called out as he drew near the lights of the town.

"A friend. I have a message for the Commodore from General Kearny," the boy had practiced these words all along the way.

The word soon spread from man to man that General Kearny must have help at once or he would be forced to surrender. The soldiers began preparing for their march across the desert to rescue the surrounded men, and the Indian looked out in the darkness, waiting for his two companions. Lieutenant Beale came in at last. His lagging feet could be seen from far away. He gave his message then he fell unconscious from exhaustion. Still there was no sign of Kit Carson.

"There is yet another to come," the boy said to the guard.

"He took the long way to the left."

"Then he'll never make it, for the enemy is camped there, thick as flies," the guard replied.

"He's been in worse fixes before," the boy said, and stubbornly sat on, with his eyes toward the wide valley beyond.

At the first sight of dawn, he saw something moving, far out on the horizon. Closer and closer it came, until he knew it was the figure of a short, sandy-haired man.

"Kit Carson!" he shouted. "Here comes Kit Carson!"